

*THE LIFE and DEATH
of
MRS. TIDMUSS*

WILFRID BLAIR



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THE LIFE & DEATH
OF MRS TIDMUSS

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AN EPIC OF INSIGNIFICANCE
BY WILFRID BLAIR



*He hath put down the mighty from their
seats, and exalted them of low degree.
Whosoever therefore shall humble himself
as this little child, the same is greatest in
the Kingdom of Heaven.*

Blessed are ye poor.

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TO
MY MOTHER

FOREWORD

The book might be titled, as every other book might be titled:

"Waste."

The poem shakes us with the accusation that we are accustomed to turn both simple and sensitized beings into living clay. Here the terrible transformation takes place stanza by stanza in the events of a routine which we accept. There is no degradation which we will officially admit. There is childhood, girlhood, womanhood, wifehood, motherhood. But its other names are, after childhood, four phases of living clay, and then death. The poem celebrates the ruin of no great potentiality; it celebrates merely something pitiful and joyous and wistful, slowly rotted by a routine which we not only accept but glorify. It is the immemorial waste of womankind, and so of mankind. It is the infinite daily murder.

ZONA GALE

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THE LIFE & DEATH OF MRS TIDMUSS
PART I. CHILDHOOD

M*Y darling is so young
Her eyes are yet star-smitten
As though their gaze yet hung
Where late her soul was litten.*

*Such gold is in her hair
She has, you see, just wended
From God's wide nursery where
His babes are sunshine-blended.*

*So softly, purely glows
Her face, earth has not smutched it
Since the essential rose
In some far silence touched it.*

*What can I but repeat
The vow of every mother—
There is not one so sweet
In all the world—none other!*

*Sleep now, my own, my own:
Lie still where I have laid you.
(Ah, God, when you have grown
Other than God first made you!)*

*The bird-sung morning blue
Rapturously shall wake you,
And each dear thing you do
Then busily retake you.*

I

WHAT the unknown and immaterial womb
 Whence we awhile round the small fire of Earth
 Come huddling, worlds us in; and to what tomb
 We are forthtaken. Between death and birth
 Lie all that we dare certainly call life—
 Love, effort, greed, fear, courage, pain, and mirth.—

II

Why their confused, uncomprehended strife?
 Is the clutch'd creed that life shall not be ended
 Truth or fierce craving? Yet with drum and fife
 Life and endeavour are not less attended,
 Though death be death, and in themselves—the high'st
 Alike with the most trivial—yet are splendid.

III

Therefore, let be! Whether the moral tryst
 Man strives to keep be set by any God,—
 Whether men follow Mahomet, Buddha, Christ,
 And they be dead or live,—we plod and plod,
 Eternally, inevitably taught
 To know the rein, to feel reward or rod.

IV

SIMPSON, a smart young fellow, who had bought
 A small greengrocery in Willingham,
 Married Kate Wilkes: good stroke all round, he thought,
 For she was brisk at business, and the same
 At motherhood. She bore him three stout sons,
 And last of all little Selina came.

V

Her earliest memory was Sally Lunns.—
 "Your Gran'ma used to give me pennies, dear,
 And always warned me, 'Little gels as runs
 Across the road without they see it's clear
 Gets knocked down, 'Leena.' So I needn't say,
 I never crossed when any carts were near.

VI

"I got the Sally Lunn's across the way,—
Isn't it funny that's the earliest thing
As I remember? It's as clear as day . . .
Why, I can almost hear the kettle sing
After I'd climbed the stairs and passed the turn
Just where your Uncle Bob would hide and spring.

VII

"How he did frighten me! I couldn't learn
To take it all in fun. I used to cry . . .
I was so careful not to let them burn—
The Sally Lunn's, I mean. Ma let me try
To butter them—but that I couldn't do.
How I remember it! How time does fly!"

VIII

And there were other early memories too:
Greens and potatoes in the small dark shop,—
The errand boy she used to call Boy Blue,—
And rows of Sarson's Vinegar: that crop
We harvest sweet all but from babyhood,
Unmouldered by the many loads on top.

IX

Always, from quite a tiny, she was good
And "gave no trouble,"—quiet, timid, humble;
Minding her dolls, or doing all she could
"To help Ma"; crying seldom at a tumble.
She feared her brothers woefully, aghast
Alike to see them fight and hear them grumble.

X

She had but scanty petting-time, soon past,
Although the only little maid. Her mould
Was not the same as that wherein was cast
The rest of them: her brothers, rough and bold;
Her father, quick and sharp and self-reliant;
Her mother, big and brusque, inclined to scold.

XI

She was so soft, so dutiful and pliant;
She had no "spirit," as her mother said,
Who would have relished her at times defiant,
Self-willed, or saucy—not so lightly led
And lovesome. In the four-year-old small heart
Love of her bustling mother lived with dread.

XII

She went to school, to learn the early art
Of making mats of beads and coloured strips
Of pretty shining paper. At the start
She was terrified, and made her tiny trips
Quaking to Miss Delaney's, and in class
Whispered her two times table with mute lips.

XIII

With such a child that stage was slow to pass
Ere she, though but self-consciously assured,
Went to school—said her mother—"bold as brass."
And then that doleful time must be endured
Of lonely striving with the spelling book,
In parlour or kitchen mournfully immured:

XIV

When the big hope of learning quite forsook
The little baffled head, and twilight sighed
Grey on th' impossible page, and tight tears shook
From eyes repugnant, and the loreless pride
And glamour of school-books and satchel small
And having real home lessons wholly died.

XV

And now you see her, lingering at all
Sweet shops and toyshops coming home at noon;
And where the rude Free School boys fight and bawl
(She clashed with them at two) praying the boon
Of passing unobserved; and then at four
Fugitive hopscotch with her toe-worn shoon.

XVI

These little ones!—thus tiny on the shore
 Of life's far-spread, uncomprehended surges;
 Great-eyed and finger in mouth at all the roar
 And fact ungraspable; yet them Time urges,
 Pinafores, piteous, and will not stay,
 And will not spare—e'en now—from the pangs and
 scourges.

XVII

AT Miss Delaney's four times every day
 They sat upon the floor to change their shoes.
 Selina's buttonhook had gone astray,
 And a small boy beside her let her use
 His for a kiss in payment, there bestowed.—
 Openly, simply, swiftly childhood woos!

XVIII

And yet—to walk handfast along the road,
 Excel a little when she knew him near,
 Cuddle his memory nightly: therein glowed
 No different ecstasy, nor yet less dear
 Nor less authentic than might them possess
 Cognizably in any elder year.

XIX

He came to tea. She wore her new stuff dress.
 She'd been so eager, yet—she scarce knew why—
 The party wasn't love's foredreamt success:
 Her home, she felt, with his could never vie,
 While he was thinking it more fine than his,
 And both chill cynic Age kept shamed and shy.

XX

But there were friends these grown-ups could not quiz,—
 With whom she too in turn unerring traced
 What the primordial way of girlhood is,
 From littlest up to biggest: arms round waist,
 Whispering, secret-telling, secret-showing,
 Fond, fickle, prone to embrace and be embraced.

XXI

She ne'er was one of the assured and knowing
Five, six-year-old born leaders of a group
Of other infants. She was towed, ne'er towing,—
A meek admiring dinghy 'neath the poop
Of some tall frigate; though to fact's plain view
Both little ones might bowl the same-sized hoop.

XXII

These years—'tis commonplace—had soft worn hue,
But only here and there the fabric kept
Its intricate pattern, where not perished through,
Or where the gradual ravelling had not crept
By broken strands and all of warp and weft
But sweet dim colour in oblivion slept.

XXIII

Such frail remains with the at times too deft
Needle of memory Selina mended.—
“Once—I was very young then—I was left
Outside a shop, and wandered off, and ended
In getting lost—oh, miles and miles away!
And a kind lady, very rich befriended

XXIV

“The naughty little girl she found astray,
And took me to her house. She'd lost a daughter
And cried when Ma came for me.”—Or: “One day
I went with brother Bob—I hadn't oughter—
Fishing with tadpoles, and fell in, and nigh
Got drowned: I was three minutes under water.”

XXV

As meek ones do, she loved to magnify
To monstrous deeds such mildly ill careers
As these had truly been; or else her eye
Retained them as red spots in after years
Staring from her grey duteousness of youth
With her few whippings and perfervid tears.

XXVI

IN the accustomed plating-bath of Truth,
 God, Jesus, Heav'n, & Love—mixed metal & dross—
 They dipped her. She was rubbed to easy ruth
 For disobedience, greed, and being cross.—
 Morals were Ma's blind tribal law transmitted,
 Religion just their meretricious gloss

XXVII

Sunday, Church, Sunday School, with their befitted
 Clean underclothes, best frock, and tightened hair;
 Shut shops, hushed streets, bells, dinner-smells emitted
 Comfortably upon the Sabbath air:
 These were (to sound mute notes in that small head)
 The shrine of Goodness and oblations there.

XXVIII

A Saviour tacked above her iron bed,
 And texts, were all the pictures in her attic,
 Which had besides one chair, a table instead
 Of washstand, and a chest of drawers erratic;
 Also some drugget. But the room was *hers*.
 Such sole possession was well-nigh ecstatic.

XXIX

SO the slow pettiness of childhood slurs
 Across life's early pages. What remains
 Rememberable, where nothing that occurs
 Adds one light scruple to the heroic gains
 Of man's existence? Here is but forthshewn
 What in the sum builds up a few gold grains.

XXX

Yet 'tis the Argument, that these unknown,
 Unknowing, feeble, ineffectual freight,—
 These, each innumerable seed grain strown
 Of life, ev'n in their unheroic fate,
 Their very plight of spurless littleness,
 Are glorious, heroical, and great.

XXXI

Look we then never on one that shares this stress
Of living, low moss on paths beneath dread feet,
Except to glorify and pity and bless.—
For these unblooming is no record meet,
Who have roots and fibres, grow, endure, and die
Alike with storied roses royal and sweet?

XXXII

MEASLES and mumps and whooping cough went by,
Perfunctory pale legates of release
From getting up and school and every tie
Of trite routine that held the long home peace.
The doctor sometimes came, and now and then
Tremendous rustling aunts would awe their niece.

XXXIII

She stayed in one such dragoness's lair
("A breath of country air" was Ma's decree).
And once she went with Pa and Bob and Ben
To the sea-side, by train, and saw the sea,
And had a spade, and digged. And sometimes too
They all shut shop and had a day-long spree.

XXXIV

Bright flecks like these—the bird-sung morning blue
'Twixt country curtains,—thrilling hunts for shells—
Showed where her shuttle thridded through and through,
Steadily, silently . . . But what impels
The shuttle, she ne'er wonders; on what loom
Scarce asks. Ahead there's Heav'n, she's taught. None
tells
What the unknown and immaterial womb.

THE LIFE & DEATH OF MRS TIDMUSS

PART II. MAIDENHOOD

LOOK *where she comes! . . .*

Oh, have you seen

With vision which beatifies yet numbs

The heart with ache of instant transience—

Have you seen flowers,

Ruling their hour of hours,

Princesses yet, but hence

More regnant than the most redoubted Queen?

For lo, they yet are virginal: not yet

Can they forget

The little blind-eyed buds they were at play

Among warm wafts of May,

Though now they stand so slender-stemmed and straight,

So confident and fearless,

In their full-moulded youth to sway their fate.

Are they not peerless

Thus, as in innocence and sureness grown

They bosom to that swift noon

Where sureness, innocence are blown?

So she,

And hers high June . . .

Ah, though I pester Time

To bring her quick to be

Queen of ample turbulent life with me,

Yet—yet I see

That peerless in this princess-prime

She is serenelier sovran. Where is sway

Like that which strikes from sweet limbs' lissom play,

From confident eyes—

Gleam mountain tarns where innocence yet lies

Reflecting far cloud-fleeces of surmise,—

*Quick colour, the clean spirit hath in gift,
 The brave young breast's quick lift,
 The dappling laughter and the voice that plumbs
 Liquidities of lovely sound,—
 And from the firm small hand that from the ground
 Would boldly grasp, its writhing to caress,
 Life's viper gage?
 —Such is my love. Look where she comes,
 Now at her nonpareil of age,
 The nonpareil of loveliness!*

I

THERE is not one of us whom Time forgets.
 Rather 'tis we unwittingly who lay
 Our wear in cupboards, and this pale moth frets
 Silently at their freshness. On a day,
 Inventorying vesture we have worn,
 We find how finally 'tis put away.

II

So with Selina. Life resumes new born
 From childhood's lost lapse into maidenhood.
 Or you may take it there's a page out-torn
 From this poor story, to the reader's good.
 She was a child and is a maid—recalls
 No more herself. Can more be understood?

III

Still with her instinct to go close by walls
 Rather than balance along kerbs, and still
 One of the indistinguishable thralls
 In making—scarce to good, though less to ill:
 Merely to life: even at mad thirteen
 Obeisance was her master, not self-will.

I V

At mad thirteen!—when hands should not be clean,
Nor combs required, nor spotless pinnies prized,—
When children should be heard, yet not unseen,
Nor chastened, though most frequently chastized,—
When teachers and mammas should touch despair,
And God's own image go a deal disguised.

V

Do not suppose Selina had an air
Of being priggish, or was always prim.—
"The girl's anæmic!" Ma would oft declare,
And "Mother Seigel's" and maternal vim
Were both administered, with no avail.
Simply, she was not born to be a limb.

V I

Anæmic, true, she was: plain, peaky, pale;
Yet jogged along,—sound, you'd say, in the main;
Ran skipping with the rest who without fail
Would stop, stoop panting—and if one, then twain—
With hands at frock's hem just above the knee
To clutch up stockings ever and again.

V I I

With them she linked, nudged, giggled; held in fee
Rather as one who sought the happy sway
Of doing as others, safe pack-fealty.
But when they formed close-headed groups to say
In whispers things illicit being veiled,
She listened to them dumb, or slipped away.

V I I I

'Twas from these things,—the half-guessed, half-retailed,—
Rogue seeds of careful books and folk which fill
The fallow mind with fruits,—that sex came, jailed
But grinning uglily behind the grille.
Nature thus hushed into a thing of shame,
Inhibited, sets up a furtive still.

IX

Her bold brisk mother here was lax and lame.
Felt duty brought her but to blurt abrupt
Dark scanty phrases as occasion came—
Hinting, not telling; tending to corrupt
Rather than purge inevitable thirst
With clean cool draught of knowledge crystal cupped.

X

Some girls—nor yet the bad ones—were immersed
In sweethearting, gave kisses to the foe.
Never Selina.—Long enough she nursed
Wonder at one grown girl she used to know
Afar at school, when news came she had married.
She felt she never, never could do so.

XI

AT fourteen school was done with, and she carried
Her education ballast into life.
Tight in her mind the twelve-times table tarried
With all his younger brethren; she was rife
With dates and rivers, and could parse and spell,
And thus was fitted to be woman and wife.

XII

So to the fancied freedom we foretell
In every change. At first 'twas full delight
Not to sit school-bound, but to help Ma sell
And Pa pack orders. But she was not bright:
Slow to pack orders and to say the price—
No asset to the business in their sight.

XIII

And yet she always thought the shop was “nice,”—
Acceptance being her way with all she saw;
For discontent was an often-cited vice:
The mother used her own womb’s docile awe
Ruthlessly, while she scorned it, to compel
Convenient content with any law.

XIV

One kind of girl had loved the chinking till,
Her brothers' breathless dash ("*Ten pound o' apples!*"),
The earthy smell, the mellow golden spill
From orange boxes, and all glow that dapples
Dimly from piled fruit-baskets in a gloom
Rich as the gloom of Medicean chapels.

XV

Another would have loathed it like the tomb,
That half-light, draughty and breathy, and the shop's
Dank earthy smell that reached to every room,
And rhubarb stacks, and clammy turnip tops,
The damp floor grimed with grit, the must of mice,
Her staggering brothers, and their boots' clop-clops.

XVI

But thought-forlorn Selina thought it "nice."—
It was the shop; what else, then, should she think?
But for the dark, boxed kitchen, where a slice
Of dripping-toast, ready in half a wink
And half illicit, ever tempted her
She'd a true preference which she did not blink.

XVII

Here dwelt the drudge, a little mongrel cur
Who Harriet hight—a cheap-got charity girl.
She read *St. Elmo* and *The Lamplighter*,
And in her tow-head a continual whirl
Wantoned, of plush romance, from dawn's chill chores
To evening's chatter over plain-and-purl.

XVIII

She, fiery-fierce herself in rebel wars,
Divined an alien in the feudal hold,
Succoured her, healed unfelt incipient sores,
Gave adoration, and sprang high to enfold
The colourless little mistress, not with wings
Of a draggled drudge, but a mother's rose and gold.

X I X

Hard by the hob, her flushed imaginings
Beheld tall suitors, dark and debonair.
Courteous attentions led to diamond rings,
And orange-blossom bloomed in the kitchen air.
Selina, listening, thrilled towards the sex
And wondered, "Might one come—and would she
care? . . ."

X X

Her mother made unsentimental wrecks
Of adolescent fancies, lacked 'em through
And toppled their sweet spars about the decks:
"Well, no-one's ever going to marry *you*"—
Or, "You're a bad debt, certain—booked old maid."
Then her brisk broadside shrug; why burke what's true?

X X I

WHEN she left Sunday School, the curate paid
A visit to her mother and suggested
The girl should be confirmed. Her mother played
Polite procrastination: she protested
'Leena was young . . . she didn't know . . . she might
Think of it later . . . And the matter rested.

X X I I

The curate, at the hint, took easy fright.—
One mentioned it: a thing one couldn't press:
Delicate . . . awkward . . . he'd done what was right.
And Mrs. Simpson called on Heav'n to bless
The man.—As if it wasn't quite enough
Going to church regular! All this foolishness! . . .

X X I I I

Ah, if 'twas God devised our human stuff
And sphere, He wrought too well: it's made so real
That He Himself must suffer its rebuff
Being so less actual.—Thus made, we feel
This finite fabric of the world's affairs
So fundamental, He must come to heal.

XXIV

Therefore Selina says her formal prayers,
 Goes to church, and is good. The shuffle of feet
 Is all she's conscious of, while life prepares
 Its next great act, which from her shilling seat
 She'll hardly see, and never apprehend,
 And at the last go out into the street.

XXV

AT the new swimming baths Bob used to attend
 He met a chap—"A fancier all right.
 I bought a cock of his. He said he'd send
 The beggar.—I said, 'Bring it round to-night.'
 —On'y to see my birds, you know.—I mean
 He's not my sort at all—don't seem too bright."

XXVI

And so Tom Tidmuss came; and when they'd been
 To appraise Bob's birds, Ma asked him to their meal.
 Selina then was close upon eighteen—
 Plain and still pale: "the last girl to appeal
 To any chap," said Ben. To her Tom spoke
 But once—at Cribbage, when he said, "Your deal."

XXVII

But he came back. Soon no excuse could cloak
 That 'twas Selina's self who drew him there.
 At first the Simpsons took it as a joke,
 While Harriet thrilled and chilled: her debonair
 Dark suitors!—who approached her darling now?
 —Bob growled, but made good profit from the affair

XXVIII

Mean, graceless wooing!—Yet I vow, I vow,
 Though 'mid a million others there was naught
 To mark it,—though herself could scarce feel how
 It felt, with self-perception so weak-fraught,
 Yet shall this calico shift of her poor love,
 Like a king's daughter's, be all gold-inwrought.

XXXIX

Tom Tidmuss had a mild weak face above
Loose loutish limbs; he never dressed up smart.
Ben urged the fellow ought to get the shove;
Bob, bribed with a cockerel, almost took his part;
The eldest, Bert, engaged to a sidesman's daughter,
Said the chap went to chapel—a cheerful start!

XXX

And meek Selina?—Why, when Ma's cold water,
Effectless, turned to real warm reproof,
Selina startingly rose up and fought her,
Though Harriet hitherto had held aloof,
Lorn of romance.—Yes, of her lone avail
The colourless flung colour in her woof.

XXXI

How did it seem to her?—Athwart her pale
Lack-lustre, nigh unloved, intentless life
Struck the strong glory of the glamoured male—
Glamoured by *her!*—began the dear, dread strife,
Omnipotent, mysterious, wonderful,
That makes a girl a sweetheart and a wife.

XXXII

A sweetheart!—*she!* Therefore she dares to pull
'Gainst that mind-bondage of the girl to the mother,—
Who, half approving her less cotton-wool
In fibre now, grows lax enough to smother
Oppugnance (though that chapel stigma frowns):
“Well, let her alone.—She'll never get another.”

XXXIII

TH E R E stoop still summer evenings upon towns
Of smoke and ugliness like Willingham.
Beauty forgives, enduing from all her gowns
One of warm air, with unseen sunset flame
Luminous, all instilled with magic bliss,
Deep'ning to dove-winged night, still, warm, and tame.

XXXIV

Holy content awakes well-deep, I wis;
 Shirt-sleev'd men sit smoking on the street;
 Tired wives breathe in the balm; man aches to miss
 One moment of the perfectness, the sweet
 Transient trouble of untroubled good.
 All noise is muted beneath Beauty's feet.

XXXV

Upon such scenes—nay, where Selina stood
 'Neath chattering street-lamps, wordless, love-entranced,
 Her face upturned from under its bonnet hood
 Pale to the wind-flung rain which, wintry-lanced,
 Smote cheerless gleams down the chill roadway's dark,
 When few but feet of humble lovers chanced:

XXXVI

Ev'n here—not, haply, in Navarre his park,
 Nor more in old Verona—the great King
 Claimed his full homage, set his royal mark.
 Love's tenants hold in chief; like hearts they bring.
 Selina flames, a peeress in his court—
 The seeming-plain, common anaemic thing.

XXXVII

The wooing took on undeclared import
 With Tom's first clumsy kiss, by the parlour fire.
 Then came long walkings-out. Their view was short:
 Not yet to troth-plight ev'n did they aspire;
 They formed no plans, no vows of faith were made,
 Yet now Selina lived one dumb desire.

XXXVIII

Time drifted. Tom was in the printing trade
 And earned poor wages. Then, quite unforeseen,
 A job was offered him, much better paid,—
 Compositor and stone-hand on the mean
 Provincial paper in the county town
 Fifteen miles off. Selina was nineteen.

XXXIX

Speared now green hope and promise through the brown.
 Things inexpressible Tom tried to speak.
 The attempt sufficed: dim castles melted down
 To bright red brick at six-and-six a week.
 He'd saved a bit already—could now save more.
 She had a ring and roses in her cheek.

XL

Some social drop the Simpsons might deplore;
 Still Tom was "steady" and "on the Press," 'twas true.
 And now Selina owned a bottom-drawer
 In open glory, and her needle flew,
 Sedulous, as she sewed her secret soul,
 Making new garments for a life made new.

XLI

"*Dear Leena,*" sprawled a hard-breathed note, page-whole,
 From him who dissed brevier with clean aplomb,—
*"I hope you're well. I bought a niceish roll
 Of lino. Do for stairs. I bought it from
 That shop in Town End. Which that chair was sold.
 Dear Leena, now no more. Your loving Tom."*

XLII

And she wrote sometimes too, as the long months rolled
 While he saved slowly, fifteen miles away:
*"Dear Tom, I hope as how you've lost your cold.
 I hope as we shall see you Saturday.
 Ma says, Not Brass. Your loving Leena.—P. S.
 Bob says as that Black Hamburg hen won't lay."*

XLIII

Each vile cheap chattel had individual stress
 Of saving, finding, bargaining,—lived dear
 As the ugly, useless, treasured wedding-dress
 Ma had Miss Waters in to make. A year
 Went by, with ever-quickenning preparation
 Of learning, making, saving. The time drew near.

XLIV

THE time drew near. . . . But with what excitement
 Of that slight bosom when a day was named
 That day she went with Tom in pent elation
 To see the little house he'd found; how flamed
 Her poor imagination standing there,
 I fail to tell—and half would feel ashamed.

XLV

Then maidenhood's last days.—Bridget's dark lair,—
 The stuffy, knick-knack-crowded parlour,—yes,
 The smell of the shop, the very turn of the stair
 Which Bob made fearful in her littleness,—
 Pa whistling still,—Ma all but gentle grown,—
 Her brothers ev'n: all these she'd vaguely bless.

XLVI

She made that final sacrament, unknown,
 Unknowable, on her small iron bed
 In girlhood's loved, lost chamber, stark alone.
 Life's dreadful rupture broke in tears quick shed.
 There rose a bride from that chill counterpane;
 The girl who fell there was forever fled.

XLVII

Her epithalamium, in such antique strain
 As sang dead brides no worthier but more high,
 Hymns through no cantos. How in their God's brain
 These myriad insignificant signify,
 Each, individually, no poet vents.
 What's one of many? Pass poor units by!

XLVIII

*"Song! made in lieu of many ornaments,
 With which my love should duly have been deckt,"*
 Full tenderly take up thy mean contents.—
 Church-going folk that Sunday never recked
 Whose nuptial rice they trod into the mire—
 The new-made Mrs. Tidmuss' sole effect.

XLIX

She had no wedding bells. Her well-oiled sire
 Led her in tribal veilings up the aisle
 To where a curate, impatient for his hire,
 Hovered, and Tom in his stiff Sunday style.
 Things went through quick. It mattered not. She moved
 In a mazed phantasmagoria all the while.

L

So, through the breakfast, and till it behooved
 That they should start.—“She’s only half-alive!”
 Two cousins nudged. Thus the last severance proved
 A numb affair. An uncle was to drive
 The couple home (a market-gardener he).
 She left, ’mid one dim buzz of the old home hive.

LI

Dropped at their tiny house, she made the tea,
 And through blurred senses came the slow, strong comb
 Of realization as on Tom’s lank knee
 She clung upon his breast.—“This is my home!
 This is my husband!” More and more there lours
 Close dreadful Destiny through deep’ning gloam.

LII

“Now bring the Bryde into the brydall boures.
 The night is come.” Cry, Juno!—Mary! Own
 This votary, some Goddess! Strew with flowers
 The poor bed—yea, thyself the mystic zone
 Unloose.—Mother, stoop down to this mean child!
 Life brings her to thee now. Cherish her lone!

LIII

Ah, *lente currite*, cry! Th’ implacable, wild
 Horses o’ the night course on their cruel way.
 Life, that with Time is still unreconciled,
 Battles forlorn on this its highest day.
 Noon gains no stay. It passes. The sun sets.
 This is the noon of life. It gains no stay.
 There is not one of us whom Time forgets.

THE LIFE & DEATH OF MRS TIDMUSS
PART III. MOTHERHOOD

ARISE, O loveliest!
Break the warm toils of consummated sleep!
Bathe and endue thy limbs
With dear familiar garments.
Joy like a swallow skims
Life's harvest mocking men who reap;
Yet shall the toilers keep
The vision and the song
To cheer the day along:
Languors must hence, thy spirit be all at leap.
—O loveliest, arise!
What shame if sloth re-dims
The monstrance of thine eyes,
Which night did mew
Day-soiled, which now shine new
After repose as this new day with dew—
As this unsailed-on day with adventure's hest!
Come! Ere the birds have done their hymns,
Arise, O loveliest!

I

D A W N, breaking behind roofs across the street,
Selina, in her flannel nightgown, saw,
Lifting the blind. Fleetly she dressed, to greet
New life with duty, and in the grey and raw
Went down to work. Routine's old flood o'erwelled
Swift subsidence of ecstasy and awe.

II

All her untried experience was knelled
Like fateless flat rehearsals that first day
Of lonely self-reliance, though she held
A bright face up to Tom, who went away
Happy to his accustomed work; while she
Wrestled against a rose world's threat'ning grey.

III

She did her tiny house, then took the key,
And, tingling-nude as e'er Godiva, scurried
Along the street to shop, with her old plea
To pass unnoticed. She was badly worried
Feeling the bland, brisk butcher had her measure;
Then, fearful for her dinner, home she hurried.

IV

Earth held for her that morning no such treasure
As wifely craft, in cooking that plain meal;
And, Tom safe fed and sped, she found ill leisure
To plumb responsibility, to feel
What myriad, life-won, careless gems her Ma,
That unimagined Inca, must conceal.

V

That night as Tom, a placid padishah,
Sat in the Windsor chair and puffed his pipe,
She, on the rug, fell sudden a-weeping.—Ah,
Tom's lost amazement then! What unknown gripe
Of strange grief had her? It was all so good . . .
It couldn't be those onions with the tripe?—

VI

Not hard, but hardish? . . . Doing what he could,
He put his big hand on the desolate form
Bowed to the kitchen fire. He understood
But dimly; she tried vaguely, when the storm
Abated, to explain:—those onions . . . all
The day's chill sneaps on wings new-fledged, nest-warm.

VII

So many things were instant to appall
This captain of a self-manned cockle boat
Cast loose on the lonely ocean. Fall by fall
She learned to walk, with none to help or note.
Tom was not there, and did not understand:
He could but praise, console, admire, and dote.

VIII

Yet, after all, 'twas Love who held her hand
Over those early days beset with fears,—
When she was yet close-castled 'gainst the band
Of neighbours trenched unseen, all eyes and ears
And trouncing tongues, round her, young neophyte
Of matronhood, unproven of her peers.

IX

Her mother, ne'er so welcome to her sight,
Came the fourth day to see how matters went.
Selina, in most shy and shamefast plight,
Pressed to the bold jet bosom, was content.
Flatt'ringly esoteric matron-talk
With mother-care was comfortably blent.

X

And so she battled o'er each earliest balk
Of keeping house, and did not fail her lord.
She clung on him close on their first Sunday walk,
Proud that her morning's work had blessed their board
With his full-feeding tribute (clean shirt-sleev'd
He'd watched her cook); found worthy, she adored.

X I

Acquaintance with her neighbours was achieved,
And intimacy ev'n with one of them—
A Mrs. White, snug-windowed and deep-eaved
With life-experience, buttressed with broad phlegm
And human tolerance: an old wife, true bred,
Kindliness her rose-bowering diadem.

X I I

She made strong mark upon the girl new-wed,—
Showed masterly, like her mother, and yet kind.
The one had barren shrewdness of the head;
The other, mellow in rougher rind,
Fruit long-suffused with mingled sun and rain,
Had wisdom, which is heart and head combined.

X I I I

TH E Y only live whose pleasure ends in pain
(Since there's no stay), whose both are tides of strife—
The very rhyme of life, which mourns its slain
Not in the dead, but in the dead-in-life.
Abeyance is but in sleep's annihilation.
Selina must be mother, being wife.

X I V

Dawn is one hush of hugest realization
Ere the great bird-shout paeans the new light,
Gabriel to sunrise. So the annunciation
Of Mrs. Tidmuss: wonder, doubt, affright,
Then fate declared—and she sat still by the fire,
Her hand fondled and held by Mrs. White.

X V

Dimly she saw life's march was swift and dire
From maidenhood to motherhood: slow spark
Of consciousness which life's "Aspire! aspire!"
Blew to distraction, flamed her to her mark,
Showed her her womanhood—to be life's bride,—
Upon her breast to see light break from dark.

XVI

So she, life's child, life's son within her side,
 Bore the long gross mean prelude to grim war,
 Worked, weary and dull, but triumphing in pride
 And duty and glory to be, and bosomed store
 Of strange new love—part plenitude transfused
 Of tender Tom's to her—for the babe she bore.

XVII

And if on swamps of sentiment they cruised,
 Miasma-mawkish over "little things,"
 Ah, hold these lowly sentient souls excused!
 Simple and trite old lamps, from which still springs
 The djinn of crude emotion, mock our jeers.—
 New lamps not seldom raise less force of wings.

XVIII

The ancient mountain-springs of mirth and tears
 Are primitive, essential, eternal, pure.
 Commerce and cities taint them, and our sneers
 Mock them thus man-debased with sink and sewer.
 Yet they who drink pollution quench a wise
 Plain instinct towards far well-springs that endure.

XIX

Compassionate, then, the 'Tidmusses' soft eyes
 Over the pitiful small garments made
 While flesh and bone were making,—matrix ties
 Loosening, while the busy fingers' aid
 Helped to effect the mystic ties 'twix dam
 And offspring, individual and arrayed.

XX

PITY it is the poor must buy the sham,
 Not able to afford the only cheap.
 It cost them dear to pay for a mean pram;
 Yet there were many things which poor folks keep,
 Themselves no longer needing them, to lend.
 Their mutual charity is best and deep.

XXI

So, as the waiting time drew towards its end,
Selina, though descended out of trade
To wage-folk status, found each neighbour a friend.
Happily meek and shy, she ne'er bewrayed
Superiority's resented gall.
And Ma was but a distant, fleeting shade.

XXII

"Pore thing!—I like 'er. She ain't proud at all"
(Would say these neighbours)—"don't set up for grand.
She 'asn't no spirit—not what you would call.
They say 'er uncle's got a lot of land . . .
'Er folks is well-to-do in Willing'ame . . .
'Er mother—don't she dress to beat the band?"

XXIII

The latter felt superior when she came
To that low neighbourhood. Selina's drop,
Plain from the "friends" she spoke of, gave her shame.
She came but seldom—didn't care to stop
For tea with Tom. Meeting "that Mrs. White,"
She knew the girl possessed her needed prop.

XXIV

Oft in this waiting time of weary plight,
On summer Sundays and late Saturdays,
Her hand and arm within her Tom's held tight,
They went slow walks by quiet, back-end ways
Where town turned country; sometimes without speech,
Sometimes a-chatter with repetitious phrase.

XXV

Never so much the need of each for each
As now, with life and death come round them near
From universal vagueness out of reach
Of private, huddling minds. And now came sheer
Relentless onslaught, savage woman-war
Where man's flung neutral, hagged with horror and fear.

XXVI

But Tom is naught to us: him we ignore.
 And of Selina, how shall man dare speak
 Of that implacable anguish which she bore?
 The strong-in-life down—smitten deathly weak
 By devastating pain—what wrong has She,
 Man's partner, done, on her such wrath to wreak?

XXVII

The feeblest, lowliest-sentient souls there be,
 Life's walkers-on, called sudden, untaught, and late,
 Must play this lead, perhaps for tragedy—
 Be for the moment whom the world calls great,
 Who, Sundered from the inapprehensive mean,
 Feel full and endure the steel'd extremes of fate.

XXVIII

And, when the extreme strange cruelty had been,
 Came the intense beatitude, its one
 Palliative. The pain-wrung grip of queen
 And thrall work-roughened it relaxes, none
 That's woman steeps less deeply than another—
 Woman delivered of her first-born son.

XXIX

The pain, the blessedness that make a mother
 By awful fusion, welching her in their
 Profound unfathomable rose to smother
 All other realization: that same stair
 She had climbed,—to view her home,—to her bridal
 night,—
 To childbed now . . . She lay, and took no care.

XXX

She saw beyond the bed-foot dawn's chill light
 Samely through her lace curtains cheap and worn.
 But beggared every feeling of such sight
 The feel of the life she had made: a bird-thick morn
 Thrilling: "*For unto us,—for unto us*
'A child is born,—a child is born,—is born!'"

XXXI

BUT the intenser light which overplus
Of living gives must dim, lest unmeant strain
Break the frail filament. The flurry and fuss
And fierceness passed; her bed of bliss and pain
She left and came downstairs—in figure and fact—
A mother, but a working wife again.

XXXII

A wife—but a mother. Her old anxious act,
Played lightlier now, was now all newly writ,
And hard additions had to be attacked.
There was her part; she had to strive with it,
Weak though she was, to satisfy the Unseen
That in the poring auditorium sit.

XXXIII

Her babe, tho', was a stay whereon to lean:
What if he made the work and weariness,
Had to be fed so often, kept so clean,
And cried so much (she could not even dress
Or hold him, till her neighbours showed her how)?—
That work did he not wonderfully bless?

XXXIV

Her mother wore an ever bleaker brow
For Mrs. White, who, when the midwife went,
Was nurse and housewife too—would not allow
Selina's hard-won strength to be all spent
And none put by. When Mrs. Simpson came,
She was always there. This did Ma much resent.

XXXV

There was no vulgar conflict, dame to dame;
One was too big, the other far too kind.
'Twas but, "Well 'Leena's got herself to blame!"
And Mrs. Simpson, easily resigned:
Came less and less, and did not vastly care—
Nor even did Selina deeply mind.

XXXVI

Of course, the christ'ning function found her there,
 And Mrs. Simpson, and the uncle too—
 Godparents all: a duly fond affair
 Which filled the Tidmuss couple through and through
 With public pride of compassed parenthood
 In that white bundle borne for the whole world's view.

XXXVII

Duly they all declared he'd been "so good,"
 Taking the ceremonial parlour's tea
 And dedicative cake. Tom Tidmuss stood
 In his best clothes, a blend of nerves and glee
 With Mrs. Simpson's eye on him, and his
 On 'Leena with the baby on her knee.

XXXVIII

The last of these primeval ceremonies
 Was when one Sunday they all went by train
 To Willingham. What pride! What memories!—
 To show her babe to Harriet, to attain
 Among her brothers some due matron height,
 To ope the drawers of childhood once again!

XXXIX

In the train going home to Clent that night
 A lady spoke to her: "Baby looks tired.
 It's late to keep him up.—But what a bright,
 Fine little fellow!" She who thus admired
 To salve reproof ne'er dreamed what time-won weight
 Through the shy wife her idle words acquired. . . .

XL

AN D now Selina, scarce released by Fate,
 Was clutched anew, must bear another child.
 Poor girl! although no rebel against her state,
 She for a time with terror was half wild: .
 It was so soon!—she was so weak! But *he*
 Must never know.—She sickened and she smiled. . . .

X L I

'Twas touch-and-go. This time Tom had to fee
A doctor, and the fight was long and grim.—
“Never again, my man,” was his decree,
Which struck Tom shamed. With struggling words
and dim
Devouring eyes he vowed to her no more
She'd grapple Death to win a child for him.

X L I I

Harry could now go crawling on the floor,
And Tilly was the baby; soon, ah, soon
His first ridiculous breeches Harry wore,
And Tilly could start eating with a spoon.
Weary and long their babyhood, but oh,
Past babyhood appeared a swift-fled boon!

X L I I I

Was it indeed but just four years or so
Since she, a mother thus matured and scarred
By quick-come summer that spring buds doth blow,
Was but a girl in soft blind spaces barred?
Could she so swiftly stand so firmly rooted
In life-experience limitless and hard?

X L I V

Like lovely melody of music muted
The ear heard once and never will again;
Like all quick joys light-fingered Time has looted,
Lost ere the heart can tell they were not pain:
So backward on her babes' lost babyhood
Too soon Selina looked and yearned in vain.

X L V

And slowly, very slowly understood,
As that new generation she had made
Grew, ever grew, the going of hers for good
Out of the glowing green-and-golden glade
Of youth to the road of middle-age she saw,
And shunned the thought. It made her feel afraid. . . .

XLVI

O PASSIONLESS, inexorable law
That draws all men like mackerel in a seine
From the unborn deeps, not one through any flaw
Escaping, to those sands where Death has ta'en
Eternally his catch! The net is wide
At first, then felt, but flung against in vain.

XLVII

Not Alexander, seizing life for bride,
Escaped foreseeing ultimate divorce—
To realize that even as all had died
So too must he, to find his race perforce
Suddenly now part run. Whom the gods love,
They only, escape, ending too soon their course.

XLVIII

Yet none the less these myriads heave and shove
Upon the ever-fecund crust of earth,
Shirking the fated issue, and above
The petty dead new pettiness has birth.
Life must be served: the lethe in that stress
Leaves little thought to feel its little worth.

XLIX

And daily as she rose from bed to dress
One new day deathward, of the myriads more
Burning life too that moment she'd ne'er guess,
Nor they of her. That moment in the pour
Of mid-day sun was toiling in the grain
Some Indian Selina; some great door,

L

That moment hushedly opening on loud strain
Of dewy bird-song in wide garden, let
The doctor forth from the long labour-pain
Of some high lady; after soil and sweat
That moment, from some man released, there slept
Some sullen woman; where the minaret

L I

Speared white and gold with early sunshine stept
Some peasant from prayer to labour, silent-treading
Fieldward through Thracian dust that moment; crept
To work that moment where tall stacks were spreading
Grime upon damp and grey some factory hand;
That moment woke some maiden to her wedding;

L I I

Some legislator famous in the land,
At the affairs of Tidmusses all night
Laborious, climbed wearily his grand
Wide stairs to bed—that moment, when the slight
Frail nightgowned figure, rising up to meet
Old duties with worn courage, saw the white
Dawn breaking behind roofs across the street.

THE LIFE & DEATH OF MRS TIDMUSS
PART IV. MIDDLE AGE

COOL and serene in her garden, tall and gracious
and stately,
She moves full-moulded of life, a lady of midsummer
lure;
Not yet betrayed by time, but confronting betrayal most
greatly,
A wonderful English lady, calm and pellucid and pure.

Her poise is the poise of a woman given all honour and
giving;
Her bosom is deep and broad as one whereon children have
lain
And the beauty whereof is based on the fulness of loving
and living,
Learned in labour and love, endurance and glory and pain.

Nobly, nobly columnar, her neck on that bosom and
shoulders
Bears the calm beautiful head, carved by the spirit of life,
Nothing assertive, yet claiming, unconscious of claim, from
beholders
Homage for woman consummate, worship for mother
and wife.

Her garments softly about her—graciously, softly, and
meetly—
Mark the light hurryless lift of the heart held delicate-
fast;
Flow as she moves on the grass, firmly, but sweetly,
sweetly;
Caress the caressing rose that is swayed by her swaying
past.

*Once were as lambs to her dancing the years, young, play-
fullest creatures;
Soon will they track her like wolves, should she fly them
or falter or fear;
Now she is walking them tame to the quiet, fine touch of
her features,
A wonderful English lady, sure and unshrinking and
sheer.*

I

HER years went roaring like a forest fire,
Still quickening on the rising wind of age,
Scorching her onward, while from their dead pyre
Green change renewed the world. As from a cage
She saw her panorama, prisoned tight
In the strict world of Tom's precarious wage.

II

Safe bolt and bar, whether for beasts that bite
Or timid creatures but for safety craving,
That had ne'er failed them yet. Each Friday night
Tom brought her the week's fruit of steady slaving,
Seed for her own toil; and when all was paid—
Club money and all—not much was left for saving.

III

The one gay bit of money that they made
Was from Tom's hobby, the few fowls he kept
And bred for points. Real trove (like all eggs laid),
Sovereigns, no less (for Tom was quite adept),
Occasional, uncalculated, sweet,
From local fanciers to their credit leapt.

IV

Change, scarce perceptible in her own street,
In those she lived among—a new child born,
Another leaving school to bear the heat
And burden of life's day—was like green corn
In fields unvisited. To view such scenes
Or hear their news would harrow her forlorn:

V

Her eldest brother now a man or means,
Wed to his sidesman's daughter: the other two
Great full-grown men; a teacher of her 'teens
Dead; and the shops, the houses that she knew,
Yielding their generation's palimpsest
Like human kind: decaying or seeding new . . .

VI

And even motherhood lost rapture and zest
With time, like summer tarnished after June.
The two between them gave her little rest:
Harry, who went to school, and Tilly, who soon
Had friends along the street and played therein
Fugitive hopscotch with her toe-worn shoon . . .

VII

WHEN in our children we have seen begin
Our own past cycle, faster and more fast
This wheel of our existence seems to spin,
Centrifugally whirling us aghast
Out from the nebular vortex, to refind
The nihilistic or eternal vast.

VIII

Being thus whirled,—feeling this rising wind,—
Selina, well remembering how slow,
When her small mind was as her Tilly's mind,
Each mighty measure of a year did go,
Saw time thus fleeter than the self-same time
Vaguely, and vaguely mourned it should be so.

IX

Tilly became a rogue to run and climb;
Harry grew big, a mother-loving lad;
Her Tom was in what custom called his prime,
And she was too,—if either ever had
A state so gallant: folk serenely dressed
On Sundays are on week days not ill clad.

X

They both accepted that which was for best.—
“Well, we must make the best of it” was oft
Upon their lips, as though they somehow guessed
Things were not really so, but up aloft
Dim jealous God willed them to be so deemed.
To all their neighbours simply they were soft.

X I

So in Tom's head no agitation teemed
Of discontent and strife. He did his work
Steadily, held the same job down, and seemed
To mates and masters one who had no quirk
In his long regular unaltered scroll,—
One in whom no assertion seemed to lurk.

X I I

It would have galled full many a wife to thole
So mild a man; but in his 'Leena's view
He was strong, wise, and safe, being in soul
Her masculine, the stock whereon she grew.
She wondered much how Mrs. White abode
Her ostler spouse, who drank, and gambled too.

X I I I

The plaster-peeling chapel in Smith's Road
Took Harry and Tilly for Sunday school; and there
On Sunday nights the Tidmusses bestowed
Auxiliary allegiance whensoever
Old Mrs. White could mind the house for them.
Such the extent of worship for the pair.

X I V

As shy as rabbits,—with some native phlegm,
Yet sensitive as snails, they wished no more.
The minister might pulpitably condemn
Such halfway hanging round religion's door,
Jibbing conformably: in life's long drudge
Lay ample worship—there they paid full score.

X V

With all small ups and downs their ceaseless trudge
Proceeded by life's byways. Times were harder,
There was slack work, unrest: Tom did not budge
And never lost his job—the dread that scarred her
Insensibly no less through weeks and years,
Scanning scant savings and insatiate larder.

XVI

Miraculously thin o'er frigid fears
The ice that myriads must skate, ne'er quit
A moment's breathing-space, coasting grim weirs
Of sickness; and miraculous the grit
They do it with, and more miraculous still
If none rebelled against the need for it.

XVII

Fortuna! should he the winner of bread fall ill! . . .
Te pauper ambit—thee they yet invoke,
Ever within thine instant peril till
The looked-for time when forth the fledgling folk
May go bread-winning. Towards that time they strain,
Dogged by the menace of thy dreaded stroke.

XVIII

Selina (while her Harry grew amain)
Was spared fatality. Her thread, it seemed,
Was spun as she herself was, pale and plain,
Not fit for stress if not for colour deemed.
And still—how fast! how fast!—the children grew,
Each childhood phase gone as a dream once dreamed.

XIX

Time came when Harry's schooling days were through,
And Tilly (aged eleven and a Turk)
Was ripe to help her mother. Tidmuss knew,
By happy chance (they printed bills for him),
A builder who agreed to take the lad
As 'prentice. He was netted with a jerk.

XX

Selina felt the sudden epoch sad;
But he went off so proud each day at six
To learn to earn his living like his dad;
And soon his talk was all of joists and bricks.
He was compliant, dutiful, and shy—
Like her, she knew,—the dearer of her chicks.

XXI

But Tilly had a brisk, a rebel eye:
Old Mrs. Simpson was her prototype.—
Selina knew, and would often sigh
O'er problems much too hard for her weak gripe
Concerning one who "ripe to help her mother"
Seemed for no net, but ambient freedom, ripe.

XXII

HARD upon this great change there came another,
Definitive indeed.—One day at tea
A wire arrived, sent by her eldest brother,
To say that Mrs. Simpson suddenly
Was dead. A stroke, no doubt—a very stroke
To smite that time-mark, that abiding tree . . .

XXIII

Fifteen years gone! In her old room she woke
(Bert's wife had put her there: she did not count)
In her old childhood's bed, among her folk.
She had mounted those same stairs she used to mount,
Passing Ma's Room, where lay her mother dead,
To lie where her bride's tears broke like a fount.

XXIV

And Bob was now a big man, bluff and red;
And Ben was out in Canada; and Bert
Seemed just to be her father now instead
Of him who once thus nippy and alert
Was suddenly a thin and weak old man;
And she a child dressed in a grown-up skirt.

XXV

Brisk Mrs. Simpson had fulfilled her span,
How could it be?—when 'Leena could so well
Her gamut of unflagging action scan!
Blank in her coffin robed, and with the knell
Of gravel on the lid, being dead she slew,
Potent life's fondled permanence to quell.

XXVI

Tom took Selina home, and Pa came too—
“Gran’pa” henceforward. So it was arranged.
(Another bed in Harry’s room would do.)
Bert worked the business. Bob, the least estranged,
Said Tilly must go to him for “a breath of air,”
To their old uncle’s place. New folk,—nought changed.

XXVII

And now, it seemed, the cupboard was less bare;
For Gran’pa paid his shot, and still as time
Went on there came in more from Harry’s share.
With such, indeed, their fortunes often climb
From this point up to when their fledglings mate
And leave them—this their economic prime.

XXVIII

But Harry had abjured the married state.—
“I’ll stay with you, Ma. I shan’t have a wife.”
(She’d smile, and yet feel foolishly elate.)
“I’ll earn you dresses ’fore you can say ‘knife!’ ”
Not so young Tilly: she had been to stay
With her fine Uncle: she had tasted life.

XXIX

Old Simpson had been glad to get away
From Willinghame, Bert’s wife to have him go.
“I miss your Mother, ’Leena,” he would say,
Wistfully querulous. He’d seemed to show
A choice and leaning to her now saying
“We are poor things both.” And she was proud ’twas so.

XXX

About this time the Boer War came braying.
What did it mean? they meekly passed the hat
As credit bade, and certainly were paying
More (as Selina knew) for this and that.
But wars were grand. They looked on Empire’s wheel
(The outer one) with pride of the hub-bound gnat.

XXXI

The Old Queen's death was dire; it had the feel
Of Judgment Day. What Actor next would shog?
Then there was Joe's campaign, which made them reel,
Round champions wrestling for them in a fog.
What was tinsplate? (Dreadful if it was "gone!")
Would food cost more? Was Britain in a bog?

XXXII

Harry, at any rate, was getting on—
Out of his time now, bringing home his pay.
He was to her the very sun that shone.
Tilly was much too gadabout and gay,
Selina felt—would try to cope with her,
Strung up to sharpness. But she got her way.

XXXIII

Selina hazarded "service."—Dreadful slur
Upon their social status, Tilly vowed!
"Ma'd ought to have some pride," she would aver.
"Whatever 'ud Uncle think?" There was a cloud
Upon her as it was. She wouldn't mind
Assisting in a shop,—not being proud.

XXXIV

And so a shop of eligible kind
Was found—the best confectioner's in town,—
Not irksome to the livelily inclined.
Two more young ladies, each with ponderous crown
Of complex hair, became her lofty friends:
And cakes tempt men-folk too. She settled down.

XXXV

A RIVER that from reach to reach extends
With scarce a murmur between weir and weir
Yet sometime its own quietude transcends,
Moving without reminder to the ear
To say the unceasing waters of the hills
Are making seaward, nearer and more near.

XXXVI

So for a time intenser quiet fills
The life of Mrs. Tidmuss: all the stress
Of her large little battles, frets, and ills
Lies in abeyance. Toil seems somehow less,
And money not so tight—how much that means
To folk who date a lustrum by a dress!

XXXVII

And yet behind there's always other scenes
Preparing while you wait, until the last.
Abeyance is all illusion. With their teens
Turned to their twenties both her chicks were fast
Moving her towards new phases. Marriage next.—
That thought, dim-forming, found her quite aghast.

XXXVIII

Tilly, of course, still worried her and vexed,
Being so free and fractious, never sure
To come home prompt (and always a pretext).
But Harry! She, so fearful of a lure,
Could feel none yet, yet feared it all the more.
The day must come when he would be a wooer.

XXXIX

With him, whom more than Tom her life was for,
That he should turn to another was her dread.
All her anxiety on Tilly's score
Was lest she met catastrophe. To wed
A "nice young fellow" (Tom-like, good, and steady)—
That proper path she'd gladly see her tread.

XL

In point of fact, her brother seemed a Neddy
To Tilly and her friends.—Girls had no use
For chaps like him: they like the sort that's ready
To make acquaintance on the least excuse,
And carry on, and chuck their money about,
And never seem to entreat a sexual truce.

XLI

Quoth Mrs. White, "The less you lets her out,
The more she'll go, Selina—jest to snap
Her fingers at you. Make her fume and pout,
And she'll go running off with some young chap
Simply to spite you. That's what young girls are.
There's no reel 'arm in Tilly—not a scrap."

XLII

Wise words, perhaps. And yet they seemed to jar
The careful little rabbit-mother's mind.
And Mr. White rose mightily to mar
The old dame's pleading: laxity might bind
Tilly to such a man. . . Or then again
Had strictness driven Mrs. White to him blind?

XLIII

And so she worried, till, with many a swain
Dangled and dreaded, Tilly jumped at last.—
"I've got engaged to Bert, Ma," put it plain:
Bert Summers, who in 'Leena's mind was classed
With most young men in these bad latter days—
Was smart and spurious, much too smart, and fast.

XLIV

She saw him lurid in the unholy blaze
Of motor engineering; he had just
Set up a small garage, went violent ways
On motor cycles; and she didn't trust
The affluence one must needs infer from them.
But Tilly meant to have him, so she must.

XLV

Mothers who with pale reticence condemn
These roseate swains it doth no whit bestead.
The fashionable hour of 2 p.m.
One swift-come day saw wilful Tilly wed.
Selina hoped that all was for the best.—
A boisterous wedding: not like hers, she said.

XLVI

Never as hers had been, she surely guessed,
Could be the emotions at her marriage tide
Contained in Tilly's self-sufficient breast.
And yet—and yet, the most assured young bride
Surely (she worried, torn for Tilly's sake)
Must feel forlorn, no mother at her side?

XLVII

Tilly, however, never meant to make
One signal of such need. She lived aloof.
She meant to achieve—and did—a social break
From her own folk. Selina felt reproof
Of all she was and aught she tried to do
Whene'er she came beneath her daughter's roof.

XLVIII

Now more and more 'twas Harry on whom she threw
The clinging arms of service. He was now
A man matured,—dullish to alien view,—
But dumbly dutiful. And he'd allow
His mother to take his arm along the street
(At least at night). He needed her somehow.

XLIX

But then, with her first grandchild, came discreet
Revenge to Mrs. Tidmuss. Kindly fate
Had made her needed now, and gave all sweet
Memories of first motherhood life elate;
For Tilly's mother-in-law was out of it,
Being duly loathed, whate'er her social state.

L

Tilly would vow she wasn't one to sit
Cooped up with Baby. In business, truth to say
She was Bert's active standby—she could fit
A tyre on; but she liked to get away
On sidecar jaunts; so now she didn't mind
Seeing her mother almost every day.

L I

AND their and all men's worlds were moving blind
Athwart the sudden comet's course. . . They woke
(For no less sudden it was) one day to find—
Dazedly, bewilderedly with all mere folk
Named citizens who know no citizenship—
War hurled on hordes who did him ne'er invoke.

L I I

All quiet streams of life were o'er the lip
Instantly of Niagara; the boil
Of spume-mad dissolution burst the grip
Of human atoms on slow effluent toil;
Chaos has come. And yet, so dazed they were,
They sought to "carry on" amid the coil.

L I I I

Not for some time did it at all occur
To Harry that the call had come to *him*.
And then he worried, gloomed; while still for her,
His mother, was that yet unreft home rim
'Twixt realization of the worst that war
Could mean. At last the home-stroke smote her grim.

L I V

For someone spoke to Harry, pushed the door
That stood ajar. He drew a sudden breath
And blunderingly went through. But when Fact tore
Thus through life's dream, & Life stood stark with Death,
What anguish squeezed Selina's fibres then
The God of little people witnesseth.

L V

So Harry went, like other lads and men
Along the street. Custom, the node of all,
Brought equilibrium back to her again.
A common ill splits comfortably small
On single sufferers; and this eased her too
Of conspicuity, ever sure to appall.

LVI

And so, like nearly all the street, she flew
Her signal, bantam-proud among the rest:
Those cards in terrace windows, red, white, and blue,
Respectability's new-written test:
"This house has sent a man to fight for King
And Country"—caste mark salving the dire hest! . . .

LVII

As when a poet starts anew to sing
And fears destude will let him soar
No better than a bird with broken wing,
Whereas to wider planes he leaps the more
By new experience: so she too found
Her life not maimed but larger than of yore.

LVIII

She lived with Harry on the training ground:
His life was hers: she tracked him through the rout
Of all strange ways and talk. The sane home-round
Was rock foundation yet, though all about
Its walls were down. So this faith ever shone:
The War would end before they sent him out. . . .

LIX

AND when he sailed, she knew that he was gone. . . .
She knew that he was gone before he died.
Her life was over, but must be lived on.
Ah, had it been but ended by the bride
She looked would slay it! This her retribution!
Life went, it seemed, that only time she cried

LX

Alone with Mrs. White. Dead revolution
Of daily deeds and needs ne'er ceased to borrow
Abominable breath from destitution.
Life gave no sanctity even to sorrow
For murdered life. That telegram to-day:
A face to brave the grocer with to-morrow.

LXI

She had not buried him: grief got no sway
 From funeral grandeur, Sunday-visited grave.
 He had but gone irrevocably away.
 It was one thing to be Life's patient slave;
 But to what end?—oh, now, to what good end?
 Nothingness! Could she see 'twas hers to save—

LXII

Hers and a million such—to save and mend
 The broken franchise of a frightened world
 For mothers and sons unborn, till life transcend
 The claim of this barbaric blood-call skirled,
 Nor ever woman fashion for brute wreck
 The unborn miracle 'neath her bosom curled?

LXIII

She saw the coralline fingers, dimpled neck,
 And lovely little body: her creation
 Cut short, annulled—and yet no change or check
 In all life's hate and greed and desecration.
 The world went on: the markets bought and sold.
 His death had bought no splendid consummation.

LXIV

The story of man is old, so very old,
 How can we tell if he but a tide,
 Rising and falling, ne'er to keep its hold;
 Or a still stalagmite which, though it hide
 All present growth, yet grows till, aeons hence,
 With its life-yielding pendant unified!

LXV

HER father died; but all her sharpest sense
 Of death had died with Harry. Tilly bore
 A son, her grandson; but all life intense
 Had lived with only Harry. Neighbour lore
 Now had it, "Mrs. Tidmuss—ah, she's failing."
 And yet she was, in fact, but fifty-four.

L X V I

She was not—never had been—one for ailing;
But she grew weaker, smaller, and (though made
Of unmixed meekness) got a quirk of railing—
A piteous-petty shrew: her mind was frayed
Ever by Bert, her son-in-law, since he
(And Harry killed!) clung crafty to his trade.

L X V I I

And now the mean mute walls which Tom and she
Had storied with their lives held once again
Only the bride and bridegroom. Tom must dree,
As in young manhood, so in his life's wane,
Still the week's toil to win the weekly hire
And still for her, although such haste were vain,
Her years went roaring like a forest fire.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MRS TIDMUSS

PART V. OLD AGE

WE bring a Queen to most high funeral.
Shout, mortals, and toss roses on the pall!
Death sets free: it is Life that holds in thrall.

*Life is the prisoning clay, and Death the sun;
Life the vague night, and Death broad day begun;
Life the gaunt trenches, Death the dim peace won.*

*To whoso fought, Death gives triumphant peace;
Whoso resisted bonds, Death brings release;
Whoso was sown, himself is God's increase.*

*Blow up, O trumpets of eternity!
Shout, souls of God, from starry sea to sea!
Start, clash your shining shields!—a soul is free!*

*Spoil all the suns to lay her pathway down!
Undight the deeps of colour for her gown!
Weld the white lakes of blisses for her crown!*

*Most powerful, pitiful flesh, how low thou liest!
Crumble, O earth, 'tis only thou that diest!
Comes glory unto Glory in the Highest!*

I

LIFE'S curtain falls, and all the tale is told.
 But dull the last act often seems and long,
 So that men find it weariful to behold,
 Tired of the palsied actors, thinking wrong
 The author, who has nought for them to do
 And should have closed their parts in action strong.

II

What use, what beauty was there in these two?—
 Tom, lank and bent of back, slow and few-spoken,
 Trusty to get the weekly paper through,
 And she, whose love by his love was awoken
 To be his mate years hence, now yet his mate
 By all those many years used up and broken?

III

Habitual use and beauty of no date
 Might be in each for the other. But suppose
 Her use to him made him fulfil his fate
 Of labouring for his masters? When he goes
 How would it hurt humanity even to see
 That useless, petty, unbeauteous business close?

IV

We spend our lives, in large or small degree,
 In sorry service which the soul denies.
 The whole world's bondage keeps us each unfree,
 Unless the Law be given in this wise
 That selfless toil, at how so soulless trade,
 God's benediction and assoilment buys.

V

Else are God and God's soul in us bewrayed;
 For all the Law is—love, and, loving, give;
 And priests and kings and prostitutes are paid,
 Because they have to live, they have to live.
 Riddle all trades, what one declines the meshes
 Of man's God-banning economic sieve?

VI

We do not know whether so strong the flesh is
Or strong the soul, to be so long a-dying.
Dying to self, is't the caged soul that threshes?
This desolate denying and denying
Of all our being: the endless doubting-fit
If self is soul, and which in bonds we are trying:

VII

Is this to save the soul by losing it?
One may obey, yet evermore rebel;
Do right, and yet be wretched; may submit,
Yet whether to God or Mammon fail to tell.
Oh, thus to pin us puzzling down in life,
Can God be good and just to invent such hell?

VIII

Nor Tom nor 'Leena ever knew that strife.
Duty lay plain: his was to fend for her,
Hers to be all, all that is meant by wife,
As simply as with lives of feather and fur.
Duty was instinct: no grand-reasoned pall
On coffin of a casuist's demur.

IX

So may it be—oh, may it?—the only all
Required (yet "only all": O mighty task!)
Is to achieve the casual state and small
Of making bricks in Egypt? May God ask
Simply the petty kindness, petty love,
Nor in high plans of exodus to bask?

X

So, He would rank these Tidmusses above
Poets and priests; and so, we too may call them
Happier in life than life's elect who shove
Such millions to the gutter, rob them, maul them.
In all the footpad purple of civilization,—
Better than fools who'd free or fools that thrall them.

X I

IN the grey evening of domestication
Selina now must trudge, and fare alone
Except for Tilly, who in domination
Succeeded to old Mrs. Simpson's throne.
She bullied and bustled every time she came,
"For Ma's good."—No mere tenderesses must be shown!

X I I

And Tom came home to supper just the same,
Tended his birds, and told the small day's news;
While she would sit, a shrunken little dame,
When all "the work" was done, and ever use
The dregs of twilight, not to waste the gas,
Doing the darning, falling into muse.

X I I I

Tilly's Rosina was a merry lass
Now eight years old, and little Bob was three.
Few childhood's memories could she amass,
But such she'd tell them when they came to tea;
Yet ev'n with them she brooked the anxious fear
That they might be less entertained than she.

X I V

"Your great gran'ma 'ud give me pennies, dear,
To buy the Sally Lunn's across the way.
I never crossed without the road was clear."
(There were no Motors then) . . . Or else: "One day
Bobbie's great uncle Robert took me out
Fishing; and I fell in. Yes, I dessay

X V

I was a good five minutes, or thereabout
Under the water. All my past life went
Before me—like a flash. Ah! there's no doubt
It was a judgement on me. I was sent
To bed, of course—I hadn't oughter go
Fishing like that." Such broideries Time lent!

XVI

“**H**OW Time does fly!” she’d say, yet never know
 How to anticipate one shock of change
 From the unchanging present. The to-and-fro
 Of Tom ’twixt home works had steady range
 Of nigh on forty years; and then one day
 Ceased suddenly. In the retrospect how strange!

XVII

He caught a chill, and ’Leena made him stay
 Fevered and shivering by the kitchen fire.
 (He scarce knew what it was to keep away
 From the week’s labour earning the week’s hire.)
 Then he got worse: she made him go to bed.
 The doctor came: she knew things were dire.

XVIII

He came at night: “as bad as that,” she said,
 Anxious, important, but three-quarters blind.
 Then two days afterwards, her Tom was dead.
 In all the world and Time she could not find
 Her fellow-farer through the world and Time
 Evermore. He had gone. And she was left behind.

XIX

God stopped at neither cruelty nor crime,
 Taking him from her suddenly like this,
 She might have felt; and seen herself His mime,
 Her lips trembling to press their unmet kiss
 On the blank face that could not say farewell;
 And might have called on all the heavens to hiss.

XX

What! could not time go back,—could not this knell
 Its pulse throbbed once upon the air efface,
 Just for so long that each to each might tell
 What each to each had been, together trace
 Their leal life-journey, and thus bravely meet
 Its end, taking their conscious last embrace?

XXI

Down the strait stair, dirged by the clumping feet,—
Never again her fellow in that bed,—
Enthralling each thronged doorstep down the street,—
Laid at the last where bitter clay was spread
To mock the new-come clay that late was man:
He went, and left her lonelier than her dead.

XXII

How little in the total could she scan
Of all his life—his doings and his feelings—
Close howsoever with her own it ran!
Mates, never met before, who had shared his dealings
With work-day life, had news for her—for her!
He had lived and died so barren of self-revealings.

XXIII

Memories and such thoughts she had for myrrh.
And now the Tidmuss history became
To that small tenement in time a blur,
In time a blank. She had with ache and shame
To sell the bits of sticks and Tom's loved birds;
Then left her home to folk of some new name.

XXIV

DEAR are the homes whereof each wall engirds
Long vanished lives, ghost upon ghost of folk,
Fragmented loves and labours, buried sherds.
Strangers we enter, then ourselves evoke
Familiar echoes, till, if such time come,
How the heart aches when our own bond is broke!

XXV

And how the heart aches or is anguish-numb
At parting with the cherished household gear
We have clogged our lives with,—saving here a crumb
Of consolation from the auctioneer,
And parting there with ugly treasures lacking
Any use but memory's which makes them dear.

XXVI

Tilly's was the insistent force attacking
Scruples tenacious yearning and regret.
Doing her callous best to send them packing.
She let her mother keep the bedroom set,
But stopped at that.—“You don't want all this now.
Sell the old stuff for just what you can get.”

XXVII

What could meek 'Leena do but meekly bow
As to a mother's fiat. Tilly was master.
A pitiless tempest—she could ill say how—
Had swiftly smitten her grey sea-plains and cast her
On to a bare inhospitable coast,
A destitute sole foundling of disaster.

XXVIII

For now her son-in-law must be her host,
And she in charity must eat his bread
Who in the hurt brain ever raised the ghost
Of Harry, as if his blood was on Bert's head.
She knew that Tilly did not want her there;
But Tilly “knew her duty”—so she said.

XXIX

Selina would have less misliked to fare
Back with her bluff old red-faced brother Bob.
But . . . he was kind . . . yet hadn't seemed to care
To have her. He was one of that sleek mob
Into whose mouths like manna War thrust money.
He'd bought a Ford from Bert, but liked his cob.

XXX

HOW live the bees unless to toil for honey,
Or take their winter ease on spoil well won
When bloom was petalled full and days were sunny?
The bees die quickly, their last flight i' the sun
Quenched as they work; the young queen comes to slay
The old unfruitful queen whose day is done.

XXXI

Selina's fruits were service. Now her day
Seemed done; but she must live, devoid of use,
Feeling herself "a burden," "in the way,"—
Feeling downright insufferance and abuse
Massing their guns, did she but overstrain
Conventionality's precarious truce.

XXXII

Painfully lingering, snows of winter pain
The forthright winter-fated summer weather.
Eld's ways and thoughts and influence are bane.
Each generation fronts the other's tether
And chews provocative its mental cud.
Crabb'd age and youth can never live together.

XXXIII

Selina lurked, a canker in the bud
Of Tilly's social bloom; or kept in shade
As one that had brought shame upon the blood.
Tilly had gained anew the caste of Trade,
Nay, more, of Engineering. In her mind
Her mother was a slur that might degrade.

XXXIV

And yet Selina ne'er was slow to find
Reasons which showed that towards the hen that hatched
her
This cygnet was quite adequately kind.
She was so quick: poor foolish people fratched her.
So businesslike: her Gran'ma was just so.
Heartless?—she hid the feelings that attached her.

XXXV

Thus till Time wreak the timeless overthrow
Of all Illusion, mothers will not cease
To gild the rust and flaws their children show.
If 'tis not so, not Death that brings release
From all the strife and wounds and tiredness—
Not even Death can close their eyes in peace.

XXXVI

No need was hers for schooling to repress,
To be retired, and still to wear old bones
In grudging help scarce acknowledged. Yet no less
She never learnt to speak in easy tones
Of friendliness to Bert; at him she threw
All that her bosom held of bitter stones.

XXXVII

ONE day, when Autumn in defiance flew
Its battlements with crowded blazoned flags
Against its fall, she wearied, walking through
The tramp-besmattered park. One of those hags
Came wheedling where she sat: a gangrel creature
That once was woman, now a crone in rags. . . .

XXXVIII

And she, Selina, knew her!—though each feature
Was battered on life's flints from fall to fall.
The drudge, her friend! Harriet! Could she reach her
Through diffidence, time, and horror—a triple wall? . . .
"I have no money!" she gasped. (And it was true.)
Then tried . . . but Harriet passed. And that was all.

XXXIX

The shock that it had been she only knew.
She trod the path of Death with conscious feet
Thereafter. "Harriet! What have they done to you?
How could we meet like this, how could we meet
That dreadful moment?—And all those dreadful years
I don't know nothing of!" So her heart beat.

XL

And Tilly was half ashamed of evil fears
That her old mother might attain great age,
When, even then, the subsidence of piers
Long time invisible reached its last swift stage,
And the long landmark of a human fane
Ruined to earth. The heart gave back life's gage.

X L I

It had been always weak. They thought her brain
Wandering at the last.—“But what a bright
Fine little fellow!” the lady in the train
She said to me. . . . She gave me such a fright:
I allus was shy: I wanted to, I’m shore.
No money!” The heart ceased, and all the fight.

X L I I

AND it was finished. Sixty-two years, no more,
The period of her pilgrimage had been
From the one door unto the other door,
From darkness unto darkness. She was seen,
Remembered, of none, but few of her own kind—
God’s most glorious ones, man’s myriad mean.

X L I I I

Old Mrs. White, past eighty and half blind,
Remembered her, and sorrowed for a day.
The specious hearse proclaimed her to the mind
Momently: here a man broke off to say,
“That’s the third funeral I’ve seen this week.”
And then resumed: “Yes—Oils are the things that pay.”

X L I V

And God?—“God”—the glib little word we speak
Assumptively, because when all is said
The assumption’s made, whether with tongue in cheek,
Or ear to instinct, or no thought in head
Because thought dies in pecking at the shell.
Break but the shell alive the instant dead?

X L V

Whatever death may be, account it well.
If Mrs. Tidmuss died as flower and tree
And is no more, or if her spirit dwell
In unimaginable ecstasy
Within the lovely bosom of this God,
Lives now enlightened, learns and serves,—let be!

XLVI

The unchosen road submissively she trod:
 Strove to discern it, such as were her light,
 Strove to endure it, such as she were shod.
 But if this immortality requites
 Her spirit now, then surely such a song
 As shook the spheres hailed her poor funeral rites.

XLVII

Through ugly streets jogged the cortège along.
(We bring a Queen to most high funeral!)
 Folk went their ways; there was no gathered throng.
(Shout, mortals, and toss roses on the pall!)
 The sun shone, and the morn was crisp and gay.
(Death sets free: it is the life that holds in thrall.)

XLVIII

She passed the shops she bought at every day;
(Life is the prisoning clay, and Death the sun;)
 She passed the turn towards where her old street lay;
(Life the strange night, and Death the broad day begun;)
 She passed the peeling chapel in Pond's Road.
(Life the gaunt trenches, Death the dim peace won.)

XLIX

The hearse approached her body's last abode;
(To whoso fought, Death gives triumphant peace;)
 The pace was slackened to the formal mode;
(Whoso resisted bonds, Death brings release;)
 Impatient stood the curate, new to Clent.
(Whoso was sown, himself is God's increase.)

L

Tilly displayed the proper grief she meant;
(Blow up, O trumpets of eternity!)
 Bert Summers thought, "Well, it was time she went."
(Shout, souls of God, from starry sea to sea!)
 The children were behaving very well.
(Stars, clash your shining shields!—a soul is free!)

LI

" . . . Short time to live." It knocked indeed a knell.
(Spoil all the suns to lay her pathway down!)
 The black men shuffled as they raised the shell.
(Undight the deeps of colour for her gown!)
 The cheap scant wreaths lay on the ground aside.
(Weld the white lakes of blisses for her crown!)

LII

"Dust to dust"—and now Tilly really cried.
(Most powerful, pitiful flesh, how low thou liest!)
 We were but earth, and earth was all our pride.
(Crumble, O earth, 'tis only thou that diest!)
 There was a little rattle of gravelly mould. . . .
(Come glory unto God in the Highest!)
 Life's curtain falls, and all the tale is told.

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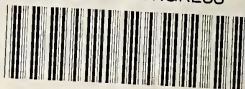
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